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ABSTRACT

The schooling/learning process is a two-way street -- that is, teachers as well as students can learn important lessons about class values and acculturation. This study focuses upon that process where by middle-class teachers are significantly influenced by their lower-class students. The results dramatize two important changes--the acceptance of violence as a practiced means of conflict resolution and an increasing tolerance of obscene language. This study challenges some basic assumptions about the nature of schooling and the effectiveness of education as an instrument of social change. (Authors)

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TAKING ANOTHER LOOK AT TEACHING:

HOW LOWER-CLASS CHILDREN INFLUENCE MIDDLE-CLASS TEACHERS

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Melford S. and Paula H. Weiss

> Tommy was more than just upset, he was angry and bristled with the impatience of ten-year olds. Jimmy had called him a dirty name and an appropriate response was demanded.

Five years ago I showed this open-ended film to my fourth grade class and asked them to write a story about what they would do if they were in Tommy's situation. The responses were overwhelmingly in favor of hitting the youthful protagonist, Jimmy. I was literally shocked. My middle-class upbringing had taught me that physical means were not the right way to resolve conflict. I had always felt that people should discuss their differences. Violence was just not acceptable.

In the five years since that event I have come to believe that the children in my class were correct. In their world, "getting even" was the most expedient method of settling conflict and re-establishing the balance of power. Willingness to fight and defend one's personhood, whether it be male or female, is necessary for survival.

Moreover, many of my colleagues who teach at this predominately welfare/working-class school share these emergent attitudes toward violent behavior. The acceptance of violence as a practiced means of conflict resolution by students is also extended to an increasing tolerance of obscene language. Furthermore, it is not accidental that the abrogation of traditional middle-class values, in favor of more realistic expectations, occurred. Finally, we feel that this teaching experience has some rather profound implications for the nature of schooling and for the effectiveness

of education as an instrument of social change.

Acculturation and Education

Acculturation has been defined as a process by which divergent groups are influenced by each other, and include a two-way interchange of ideas which may modify, in part, the socio-cultural system of both groups. (Weiss 1974:9-14).

Acculturation studies within the American educational system have basically been uni-directional. Researchers have primarily been concerned with only a singular aspect of change; the effects that the teacher and/or institution has upon school children. The educational literature strongly suggests:

(a) that children of lower social class backgrounds have been significantly influenced by the middle class teacher,

or

(b) that the middle-class teacher has not been successful in spreading the middle-class ethos to "underprivileged" children,

or

(c) that the teachers, by and large, have refrained from re-socializing lower-class students either because they have "given-up", or, in a minority of situations, decided that they do not have the right to "meddle".

Schools, teachers, and the process of schooling are middle-class, and there is evidence to suggest that middle-class teachers can and do impart middle-class values to non middle-class children. The expected success of this process is based upon appreciating the power of the teacher as an agent of change. Bidwell summarizes this evidence and claims:

> The school is responsible for both instrumental and expressive socialization and it is the teacher who functions as an agent of persuasion or as a moral exemplar. There is a generalized acceptance (by students) of the teacher's moral authority. (1974:272-3)

He further concludes:

> ...in the elementary grades where peer affiliations and norms are rudimentary, the teacher's position is relatively powerful and her own preferences with respect to the class are especially decisive...young children are prone to trust schools and teachers from the outset. (1974:264.274)

Secondly, the program by which aspiring students become teachers emphasizes dominant, and somewhat conservative middle-class values. Most often the new teacher is a successful product of the system. Moreover:

> ...teachers from non middle-class backgrounds have attained personal social mobility because they have moved from their lower-class origins to a more middle-class level; and middle-class values acquired through occupational mobility may be more rigidly binding than when the same values are of an ascribed nature. (Bell and Stub 1968:270).

Thus teachers, representatives of the American tradition, act as transmitters of academic skills and middle-class values.

Another Perspective

At this point we would like to suggest another perspective, simply that teachers are socialized by the students and the community as well. Teachers in poverty-area schools are the minority. They are often viewed as an intrusion because they are the cultural strangers whose residence in the community is only temporary. It is the teachers then who are most consistantly exposed to the concomitant effects of a different linguistic, social and cultural system, and, if they are to teach effectively, must themselves adapt. They:

> ...must understand the hip language used by the children, start with what they know and move progressively towards an enriched vocabulary. (Gezi and Meyers 1968:186)

Brembeck also reminds us that teachers should:

> ...go directly to the child's environment, learn the speech patterns, language idiosyncrasies, and slang expressions in order to communicate more effectively with him and make better use of the language skills that he has...We should not insulate ourselves from the habits and behaviors of the disadvantaged child, rather we should make ourselves conspicuously available to this child. He needs good models to emulate. (1966:328)

Teachers have a realistic exposure to, and knowledge of, the child's "neighborhood culture". They realize that significant differences between themselves and their students stem from often opposing cultural assumptions. They know that the children encounter difficulties learning in school because the school encounters difficulties in teaching them.

What we have suggested thusfar is hardly dramatic. All we have really said is that teachers are aware (perhaps even more aware than their students) of distinctive cultural styles which influence the learning process. Unfortunately, this awareness may allow teachers to blame educational failure [1] on the students themselves or their families and the casual remark, "what can you expect from these kids", is a common refrain.

Our initial research has convinced us that poverty-area children also considerably affect the value system of their teachers. Students actually alter teacher's perspectives about propriety in specific social arenas, most noticeable in regards to violence and the use of offensive language. We may further view these behavioristic shifts as an adaptive mechanism by the teachers, to high-stress situations within the school environment.

Violence: from condemnation to tacit encouragement

Agression is a trait of all human beings regardless of class. Moreover:

> ...if a person is slapped he may hit back, run away, complain, or offer the other cheek. His class membership does not (always) tell us which alternative he will choose. Yet the probability that an individual will act according to the standards of his class are high. (Bergel 1962:373)

Lower-class persons put a high value on physical prowess. Their children are considered:

> ...most difficult to control being given to unrestrained behavior and physical violence. This is in contrast to middle-class aggression which is taught in the form of social-economic skills which enable middle-class pupils to compete effectively.(Becker 1968:160)

Lower-class children often accept physical pain more or less stoicly as something that happens to every child. Generally speaking, they do not try as hard as members of other classes to control their emotions and to rein their aggressive tendencies. (Bergel 1962:377)

Speaking as a former teacher, Rosenfeld concludes:

> "Look, these kids are beaten at home all the time. They're always fighting, aren't they? It's something they are used to and understand". (1971:18)

Teachers are all too aware of these pertinent sociological characteristics. Yet, while their style in handling violence varies, it often does so as a function of longgevity and experience. New teachers who have yet to undergo extensive socialization are outraged. They reward children who tell the teacher rather than fight back. Their actions parallel their attitudes and they are swift to break up a fight on the yard or in the hall. A significant portion of their time [2] is spent separating fighting children while admonishing their behavior. By clinging to, and attempting to enforce middle-class values, the teacher often places her physical well-being in jeopardy. A personal injury rapidly terminates altruistic intentions.

As teachers gain more practical everyday experience they find themselves ignoring situations where students "just throw a punch" or where it's not a "real fight" and no one is likely to get hurt. If two students are hitting each other and they do not complain to the teacher, the incident is of little concern. Frequently both students and teachers re-define these potentially serious events as "play". Such definition allows the incident to be dismissed with all parties saving face.

Eventually when the initiated teacher spies a violent outburst on the yard she walks slowly.

> By the time I get to the scene the kids are usually willing to stop fighting. One child generally has the advantage. The other kids see me coming and start breaking up the fight themselves. If the kids seem willing to stop and no one is hurt I tell them: "I don't care why you're fighting - just stop". I separate them and forget it. If it's really serious they see the principal who talks to them and tries to calm them down. They're back in class in no time.

Incidents which require teacher interference have become increasingly infrequent. This is largely because hostilities are acted out in play. One commonly sees children wrestling, tumbling and rough-housing at the very feet of the yard supervisor. In fact, several teachers have internalized "playful violence" as acceptable and have incorporated it into their own discipline techniques. It is not uncommon to see a male teacher wrestling with several boys. The Charley-horse administered to the child who failed to line up at the bell was not only considered non-abusive, it wasn't even thought of as hitting.

By the time the teacher becomes aware of the importance and survival value of fighting, she is even ready to suggest its utility. The following example is illustrative:

> Gary, an angry and hostile child, had been picking on Richard for several weeks. Richard, awkward, introverted, but quite intelligent and somewhat middle-class came to my desk crying and told me that Gary had hit him several times. I told him: "Richard, hit him back. You have to defend yourself. It's the only way you are going to survive."

When the students view the teacher taking this kind of a position, they become reluctant to tell "tales" and report incidents. They have also learned that while the teacher does not overtly approve of violence, she often looks the other way. The end result, fewer incidents reported; of those reported, fewer demanding immediate attention.

Some confrontations however, cannot be ignored and serious infractions are punished. One method is district sanctioned paddling by the principal. Official policy forbids teachers to administer corporal punishment. Nevertheless, many teachers spank children. Although the principal is aware, he makes no effort to discourage it and tactfully ignores this practice. Thus by failing to acknowledge these incidents, he can officially deny their existance. Despite the fact that spanking legitimizes physical force, teachers justify its use as a disciplinary measure because its what the kids understand, expect, and furthermore, are used to. The acceptance of sanctioned violence reached its apex three years ago, when, at the suggestion of parents, the school instituted the use of "boxing gloves", so that student violence could continue, but under direct supervision of the principal.

Finally, the agreement with local mores can be illustrated by the principal's humorous lecture to his staff on how to handle name-calling on the playground:

> "First you tell the child to ignore it and walk away. Then you tell him to tell the yard teacher. And finally, when all else fails, tell the kid to get him after school when no one else is looking."

Thus in varying degrees, the teachers and principal have adopted, accepted and incorporated the children's ethics into their own disciplinary techniques. Violence as a means of conflict resolution is no longer condemned. It is ignored, and even encouraged. Furthermore, it is unavoidable, expected and necessary for survival. Sanctioned by principal and teachers, it is as recognized a fact of school life as are line-ups, free lunches, and yard duty.

Obscenities: from shocking to expected

Language and speech patterns may be treated as symbols of class position. Moreover,

> the choice of alternative words are abundant in the English language and it must be emphasized that in many instances the alternatives are known in all classes. But invariably, one of several synonyms is used precisely according to class membership...and this applies to words that are considered obscene. (Bergel 1962:397)

New teachers begin their career by perhaps over-reacting to obscene expressions. They express "shock" and may directly punish the child. If abusive language continues, a trip to the principal's office or a demand to see the child's parents may follow. Experienced teachers however are no longer shocked over such a common expression as "fuck". The offender is only reprimanded or punished when the remark is directly and publicly addressed to the teacher since it represents a threat to the teacher's position and authority. Frequently used playground expressions such as "punk", "mother-fucker", "pussy", and "hump" are usually ignored. And, while a teacher may not yet feel comfortable hearing "cocksucker" used in the classroom, she will in all liklihood do little about it. Even if the teacher is offended by the "cussing" or if another child should complain, the incident is likely to be ignored, since the teacher feels

incapable of controlling offensive language. One older, conservative teacher reported:

> "There is so much terrible language on the primary yard. I used to go over and try to teach the child that what he was saying was wrong. Now if a kid complains, I just tell him to go and play somewhere else."

Even when a quite liberal aide reported overhearing some pretty "rowdy" language, she was told: "you're not supposed to hear it".

Thus most teachers become selective listeners and, as is the case of violence, no longer respond to each and every incident. A principal's remark typlifies school strategy:

> "There is an awful lot of bad language used around here which I ignore, unless, of course, it is said directly to my face".

Because students and teachers are constantly interacting, the teacher normally picks-up particular slang expressions and integrates them into her vocabulary. Such terms as "don't mess with me", or "don't bug me" are part of normal conversation. Colloquialisms, often used in jest, are effective means of controlling student behavior. "Sit down or your head will go one way and your body another", or, "give that kid a kick in the butt", are apt examples.

While teachers are careful about stronger language when students are listening, the same cannot be said of adult conversations. During breack periods in the teacher's room, dirty jokes and double-entendres (with sexual overtones) are common. There is also popular interest in discussing the linguistic and behavioral foibles of the students. One story overheard by a cafeteria aide afforded general amusement.

> A fifth grade boy said to his friend: "There's nothing wrong with that girl, she's just a little frisky. All she needs is a good lay, and I'm the man to give it to her".

Such light-hearted joking and bantering also act to release the enormous tensions which are endemic in the "catch-22" world of poverty school teaching.

Thus as street language of the playground becomes commonplace and normal, middle-class values which restrict its usage become less relevent. Teacher's language patterns become more relaxed and responsive to the influence of the dominant culture.

Summary

It is often assumed that for acculturation to truly take place, there must be a permanent replacement of one set of beliefs with another. That is however, open to question. Our teachers who have learned to accept specific "cultural" responses as being both expected and proper in a poverty enclave, would hardly tolerate those same responses in their homes. Thus we might conclude that their acceptance is only situational; it's O.K. for those kids but not for their own. We are, of course, not surprised. Current research cross-culturally and particularly among American ethnic minorities reveals a similar process. Adaptation or assimilation to a majority norm is also situational, where a proper response depends upon a proper audience. Chinese immigrants, who for example have found it advantageous to seem "inscrutible" when in the presence of Anglos, are less apt to do so when in a more comfortable Chinese setting.

Our teachers also find it expedient to switch normative expectations and accept particular behavior depending upon the situation. If a teacher were to constantly spend the extra efforts to break up fights and to condemn "cussing", he would have precious little time for anything else. Perhaps downplaying (and accepting) violent behavior and abusive language

is a most successful strategy. For in refusing to maximize such incidents, teachers effectively defuse the issue and reduce the anxiety associated with such high-stress situations. That they do not wholly support middle-class values while "putting-down" lower-class behavior is perhaps a tribute to their professional common-sense. We applaud their flexibility in becoming realists rather than pedagogues.

Finally, we believe our initial assumptions are valid ones. Traditional middle-class values relating to violence and obscenity have been for the most part ignored and have been replaced by values more appropriate to a lower-class setting.

Conclusions

Understanding our educational system is dependent upon understanding the basic premises which support it. Our concern is with two of them; that the system can restructure basic values learned in the home, and that the teacher is the catalyst in that process.

We find both assumptions open to some serious questioning. Teachers may not consistantly teach the values associated with their social class. They are also participants in a learning process. Having been "taught" to accept violence and obscenity as core features of lower-class schools, they are supportive of these values and are hardly the ones to change them.

One explanation for the above statements, seem to lie in the ability of the majority to influence a minority and in the context of the lower-class school, the teachers are the undisputed minority. Although most poverty area children enjoy the approval and affection of their teachers and want to succeed academically, they must pretend to be "tough", because "toughness" insulates them from failure and from expectations of failure. They defiantly reject "teacher" values. Teachers perceive this rejection

and while they continue struggling to obtain whatever small success they can to justify their presence, they too, often feel the hopelessness of their position. The teachers too become "tough". Their "toughness" also serves as a defense mechanism which enables them to accept and sometimes ignore the realities of student's backgrounds and school frustrations. Once transformed into a "tough broad" or a "cool dude", they can easily shrug their shoulders and say--"if you can't lick em, join em".

Our subject school is a federally funded compensatory education school. We have regularly scored above expectation on standardized tests, but in every case within the lowest quartile. Since we have scored above expectations, compensatory education can be said to be working. But since we remain in the bottom twenty-five percent, we might ask - "so what"?

Compensatory education is primarily designed to improve basic skills in reading, math, and language arts.[3] It is not designed to modify values and produce social change. We strongly suggest that it never will. Changing cultural patterns is a far more difficult task. Left to the teachers, who are themselves enmeshed in the dynamics of the poverty school, dramatic changes are extremely unlikely.

At best we can hope for some slight improvement in academic performance and increased opportunities for those children who are already inclined towards social mobility. Without re-structuring the system, the acculturation of the teacher and not of the child will remain the significant process.

Postscript

This paper was based upon research conducted at a single elementary school. While our conclusions were supported by teachers and staff in

similar districts, there are some unique features, perhaps particular to our subject school.

First, the school is small in numbers with only 350 students, 17 teachers and the principal. Secondly, the principal, who is responsible for setting standards for behavior is a popular administrator, respected by his staff. He is well aware of the "culture of poverty" and emphasizes a realistic flexibility in his educational philosophy.

Finally, and most improtant, the school employs 17 aides. The aides are products of the area and have been raised within the local "cultural scene". Moreover, many aides are also the parents of students. Thus their sanctioning of formal and informal policy is, in a very real sense, an indication of community support. Aides are also "cultural brokers", intermediaries between school and community, who can influence both students and teachers. There is little doubt that they have been instrumental in helping middle-class teachers adapt to community perspectives.

We might also add that our subject school is predominately white. Thus the cultural styles associated with minorities are of less consequence. The difference between students and teachers is one of class rather than color or ethnicity.

As a final note, we suspect that the behavior and attitudes of students are also a facet of "kid culture". It is quite possible that all the values relating to violence and obscenity are not limited to only lower-class students by may be to some extent prevalent in all schools. Thus the differences we have attributed to social class may have to be re-examined.

Nevertheless, we still insist upon our conclusion; that teachers

will be significantly influenced by the culture of the children, and that teaching methods, values and behaviors will be modified by the social environment.

Research Techniques

Our field research was conducted from 1970-1975 and depended upon participant-observation combined with both structured and open-ended interviews. We observed staff and student activity and interaction in classrooms, on the yard, at recess and in the teacher's room. We were fortunate in have the opportunity to directly question students and teachers while events were occurring.

Interviews concerned past and current expectations, attitudes and actions re: violence and obscenity, and were conducted both at the school and in more informal settings.

The school staff was informed about the nature of our research and were, for the most part, eager to assist us. In addition, Paula Weiss has been a teacher at our subject school for the past six years.

Footnotes

1. While failure is viewed by educators as the lack of success and most responsible for a negative self-image, failure may hold other meanings for the poverty-area child. Failing (being a non-learner) can be a way of gaining status, might even protect self-respect, and may reconfirm the ability to handle failure. (Brembeck 1966: 226)

2. We did not "measure" the actual time spent in this activity. The teachers informed us however, that breaking up fights occuppied a significant portion of the school day.

3. Compensatory education also requires that schools make an effort to involve and re-educate parents. Our school has made many efforts, informational fliers are regularly sent home, courses in desired areas are offered, all to no avail. Attendance remains minimal.

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